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Flight 007 reported on spy mission

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From Chicago Tribune wires

LONDON—The South Korean airliner shot down by Soviet fighters last September was on an intelligence mission to test Soviet radar reactions, according to a defense magazine.

The Boeing 747, which crashed into the Sea of Okhotsk, killing all 269 people aboard, carried no eavesdropping electronics of its own, but was steered deliberately into Soviet airspace so that Western intelligence could monitor the resulting Soviet radar and electronic signals, said the British magazine, Defense Attache.

The report, carried by the Observer newspaper Sunday, said the Korean Air Lines jet was cooperating with U.S. intelligence operations controlled by the space shuttle Challenger and a Air Force electronic surveillance aircraft.

Both the plane and the shuttle were near the area on Sept. 1 when the Korean Air Lines plane, en route from New York to Seoul, was shot down by a Soviet jet.

In Washington, a Pentagon spokesman said Sunday that the Defense Department would have no comment on the report until it

gets a copy of the article. He said, however, both the White House and State Department at the time of the incident denied various allegations of any U.S. involvement.

MANY ACCOUNTS of the incident concluded the plane strayed into Soviet airspace because the pilot set his navigational system incorrectly. Other commentators suggest the plane was engaged in electronic intelligence, but it is virtually certain it was not carrying monitoring equipment at the time.

The article was written under a pseudonym, P.Q. Mann, who "appears to have access to hitherto unpublished technical information," the Observer said.

The author presents a detailed examination of the position of the space shuttle and the Air Force RC-135 electronic surveillance aircraft.

Defense Attache, published six times a year, has a circulation of 3,100 and is "well regarded" by the British Defense Ministry sales organization and the British defense industry, the Observer said.

The magazine concludes that the three were ideally placed for a

well-planned and coordinated intelligence operation.

IT CLAIMS the RC-135 revealed itself to the Russians as a military aircraft, then passed close to the Korean airliner to try to trick Soviet radar into indicating the aircraft approaching its airspace was military. The shuttle then allegedly did the electronic monitoring of the ensuing Soviet messages.

It was assumed that once the Russians identified the aircraft as civilian, they would not fire on it, the report said.

Britain's Economist magazine, which reported the Defense Attache story Friday, called it "the strongest case yet that Korean Air Lines Flight 007 was involved in an intelligence-collection mission."

Defense Attache recalled what it termed "two similar intrusions by Western aircraft into Soviet bloc airspace," both over East Germany in 1964.

"One thing seems certain," the Observer newspaper said in reporting the magazine story. "The Soviet electronic activity provoked by Flight 007's intrusion provided Western intelligence with its biggest coup for many years."